City of Las Vegas "Your City Your Way" Initiative

Focus Group Findings

Prepared for the City of Las Vegas by

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Preliminary results of focus groups conducted on City of Las Vegas residents' thoughts and opinions on quality of life issues and city services in the context of City budget deficits and impending budget reductions. The focus groups were conducted in October & November 2009.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Area Social Survey (LVMASS) research team from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Department of Sociology conducted five targeted focus groups for the City of Las Vegas "Your City, Your Way" Initiative. The focus groups provide robust qualitative data on City of Las Vegas residents' thoughts and opinions on quality of life issues and city services in the context of City budget deficits and impending budget reductions. Data collected from the focus groups also supplements the City of Las Vegas 2009 Community Assessment Survey, a telephone survey conducted by the UNLV Cannon Center for Survey Research.

Methodology

The LVMASS research team is led by three UNLV Sociology faculty members—Dr. Robert Futrell, Dr. Barbara Brents, and Dr. Christie Batson—with support from Sociology graduate students—Mark Salvaggio, Andrea Dassopoulos, Chrissy Nicholas, Candace Griffith— and Spanish language consultant Elena Pellinen Howe. The team conducted five focus groups between October 7, 2009 and November 3, 2009. Four focus groups were conducted in English, and one was conducted in Spanish. Four focus group were held in the evenings, one on a Saturday afternoon, at City of Las Vegas community centers: the Cimarron Rose Community Center, Rafael Rivera Community Center, and the East Las Vegas Community/Senior Center. Each focus group lasted between 80-90 minutes.

Thirty-one focus group participants were recruited from seven randomly selected neighborhoods across all six wards in the City of Las Vegas. These seven neighborhoods were part of a larger random sample of 22 neighborhoods originally selected for participation in the UNLV Department of Sociology Las Vegas Metropolitan Area Social Survey (LVMASS). The neighborhoods selected for focus group participation included single and multi-family housing units. The focus group research team canvassed each neighborhood, distributing flyers to announce the focus groups and request participants. Each participant was offered a $30 cash incentive for their involvement. After an initial screening of each volunteer, we obtained a total sample of 31 focus group participants (see Table 1 for additional data).

The focus group process consisted of two parts.

The first part of the focus group process consisted of a semi-structured conversation about neighborhood experiences and quality of life issues. We posed a series of questions to participants to elicit their thoughts in four areas:

1) Sense of pride, belonging and attachment to the City of Las Vegas and their neighborhood
2) Neighborhood experiences
3) Sustainability
4) City of Las Vegas government's roles and responsibilities

The second part of the focus group process was designed to supplement the telephone-administered City of Las Vegas 2009 Community Assessment Survey data by providing qualitative data about how residents think about their needs, knowledge, and desires

regarding Las Vegas City services. Participants completed a short paper survey, which asked two questions drawn from the City of Las Vegas 2009 Community Assessment Survey:

1) For each of the following city services, please indicate if you are not satisfied, somewhat unsatisfied, somewhat satisfied, or very satisfied with the service.
2) Due to cuts in the budget, some services may have to be reduced. For each of the following services please indicate whether this would be very good, good, bad, or very bad to reduce.

The City services listed as response categories were drawn from the 14 most positive and most negative responses indicated in preliminary data provided by the UNLV Cannon Survey Center from the City of Las Vegas 2009 Community Assessment Survey (see Focus Group Survey in Appendix 4).

We collected completed surveys, tallied the rankings, and used the results to elicit their verbal comments about how they understand the role of Las Vegas City services in their lives and why they prioritize some services over others.

The semi-structured conversation allowed residents to discuss the issues that were important to them regarding specific City of Las Vegas services. The short survey and subsequent discussion allowed us to hear participants' responses to services and how they interpreted some questions from the City of Las Vegas 2009 Community Assessment Survey.

Focus group participants

Thirty-one individuals participated in the focus group. Table 1 describes their demographic characteristics. Of these, 64.5% were female, 35.5% were male. The majority of participants identified as white, 66.7% and 36.7% were Hispanic. Focus group participants had lived in Las Vegas an average of 16.7 years, and in their current neighborhood 10.6 years. The group was split fairly evenly between individuals who owned, 51.4% and rented, 48.4%, their homes, and 36% listed themselves as unemployed. The average age of participants was 51.

Major findings

While our goal was to identify citizens' expectations for specific city services, participants' spent a lot of time discussing what constitutes the foundations of a livable city. The themes they raised provide an important context for interpreting their responses to specific services.

Participants realized budget reductions are necessary and those decisions would be challenging for City officials, but they offered more consensus on what programs to maintain and enhance than on what to cut. The data also suggests that many residents don't understand the scope and objectives of specific city programs, unless the programs directly affect them.

Below are the most consistent themes about the meaning of community and their connection to the City that should be considered when assessing participants' comments about specific City of Las Vegas services.

1) While participants, especially long-term residents, had a strong sense of pride about Las Vegas as a growing, dynamic, and vibrant city, they also perceive that the City's rapid physical and economic growth has come at a cost to their sense of community and connection with other residents.

2) Participants, especially long term residents, see their neighborhood as important to their sense of community and attachment. At the same time, identification with their neighborhood and bonds with their neighbors are often shallow and fragile.

    a. Participants defined neighborhood as neighbors who are regularly visible and in relatively close proximity to their homes or apartments.

    b. Trust and connection to others emerged from seeing neighbors and often neighbors' children in public, out on the streets, or in common areas, such as their local parks or community centers.

    c. This already narrow sense of neighborhood attachment is fragile due to fast growth and now increasing transience in a declining economy.

3) There are, however, key points where communities connect. Respondents repeatedly discussed children as a key component of vibrant neighborhood life and a social lubricant for neighborliness. They also named parks and community centers as sources of pride and focal public spaces for attachment to neighborhoods.

Consistent themes regarding participants' expectations for City services included the following.

1) **Increased programs for youth.** This was the most consistent and clear message that participants expressed in discussing the future of the City. Investing in youth was seen as an investment in neighborhood and quality of life as well as an investment in a safe city and secure future.

2) **Serious efforts to encourage a diversified economy**. Participants expected the City to take the lead in long term planning to create a diversified economy that expands beyond gaming as a key component to creating a sustainable Las Vegas. As a part of this effort, participants were excited by efforts to develop cultural and educational opportunities in the downtown area, including the Union Park, the Smith Center, the18b Arts District, the Springs Preserve. Participants also cited the Cleveland Clinic and the Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Heath as crucial economic drivers to promote medical and technology sectors, along with specialty trades such as the furniture exposition business at the World Market Center.

3) **Create and maintain parks and community centers**. Participants expect the City to create and maintain public spaces to enhance quality of life and sense of community, particularly parks and community centers. Those who had quality parks in their neighborhoods were proud of them; those who did not felt isolated and underserved.

4) **Maintain efforts to develop cultural, educational and economic opportunities downtown.** Participants across the Valley expressed pride in efforts to develop cultural, educational and economic opportunities downtown. Participants who lived near these areas were especially invested in the enhancements it would provide to their neighborhood.

5) **Increase communication.** Participants expect more connection with and communication from the city. Respondents, particularly those in lower income and Hispanic neighborhoods, wanted to see City Council members and officials in neighborhoods more often. Participants want to work with the city.

6) **Maintain quality of fire and emergency medical services.** In response to questions about potential cuts in fire and medical services, focus group participants see these as essential services that should not be cut. For these participants, a safe city is one that does not compromise basic health and safety that these services provide.

The remainder of this report will discuss these major findings in more detail. The first section, **Livable Las Vegas**, discusses City of Las Vegas residents' views on quality of life and the City of Las Vegas government's role in supporting and enhancing a livable, sustainable community experience. We organize this discussion by the following themes: Sustainable Neighborhoods; Safe City; Fiscally Sound Government; Pro-Business Environment; and Vibrant Urban Fabric.

The second section, **City Services Survey Findings,** provides a detailed discussion of the focus group surveys and participants' thoughts about City service needs.

The report concludes with the third section, **Considerations**, which offers some final thoughts about how we might use these focus group findings to create a more livable Las Vegas.

Strengths and Limitations

All research contains strengths and limitations. This focus group research provided opportunities for participants to discuss and elaborate their thoughts and opinions in ways that large sample telephone surveys do not allow. The open, flexible nature of the focus group process encouraged participants to talk freely about subjects of interest to them. Researchers also probed to clarify issues and draw out deeper meanings behind participants' comments.

While recruited from a random, representative sample, focus group participants in this study may not fully reflect the diverse demographics of Las Vegas City residents.

The findings and comments in this report are to supplement the larger City of Las Vegas 2009 Community Assessment Survey.

Additional focus group research using a larger and an even more diverse sample would enhance the qualitative data presented in this report. Creating a longitudinal research program would provide data to assess continuities and changes in residents' perceptions over time. A committed research program would also provide useful contextual information to City leaders for planning and policy activities.

Livable Las Vegas

Livable, Sustainable Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods and the consequences of growth

Our discussions made clear that at the heart of any vibrant city are livable, sustainable neighborhoods where residents can feel secure and connected to others. Focus group participants saw the creation of and support for strong neighborhoods as one of the most important issues for 21st century Las Vegas. Focus group participants also identified Las Vegas phenomenal growth over the last decades as both a source of pride and the heart of many problems that affect their quality of life and sense of community.

Pride in Las Vegas

Throughout our conversations, most residents expressed pride and admiration for how far the City of Las Vegas has come from a speck in the desert with a few hotels and casinos to a world-renowned tourist destination. They marveled at the unparalleled physical growth of the City as it spread westward with the Summerlin development and the northward past Ann Road toward Lee Canyon. Likewise, residents marvel at the enormous economic growth in the Valley during the 1990s through the mid-2000s.

> *"I'm proud of the city and Valley and what we've done"*
>
> *"The minute you tell someone you're from Las Vegas, you become an instant celebrity. You can see a big smile on everybody's face, so I'm kinda proud to be from Las Vegas."*
>
> *"I am happily impressed"*
>
> *"I would never move out of Las Vegas. Here you've got the rural, but you've got the city life too and you can go to plays and shows. I think it's friendly. I really like it here. I would never move out of Las Vegas. There is so much to do and I really like it."*

Despite the opportunities that such growth brings, participants were very consistent and strong in pointing to negative consequences of this growth the City must attend to. Many focus group participants acknowledge that they were part of that growth. They came to Las Vegas for employment opportunities and created a home. Now they find themselves concerned about their quality of life.

Neighborhood as a source of attachment

Participants see their neighborhood as important to their sense of community and attachment to place. First and foremost, focus group participants expressed a desire for connectedness to others at the neighborhood level. When participants talked positively about their neighborhood, they described block parties and sidewalk conversations with neighbors, or brief periods when a few residents started a neighborhood watch. Many felt upbeat and positive about the ethnic diversity of their neighborhoods. Long time residents (i.e., those living in Las Vegas for more than 20 years) carry a strong sense of pride and commitment to their homes and neighborhoods. One resident commented,

I think what people like the most is that you know the people, people know each other. There's trust.

Fragile neighborhood bonds

But when asked to describe their neighborhood more fully and who they really know and trust in their neighborhood, most described a scarcity of close neighborhood bonds, and a fragile, fleeting and narrow sense of connectedness to others. Participants interact primarily with individuals they see regularly, those immediately proximate to them in their neighborhood. As one participant said, "I only know the people on either side of me." For those in single-family homes, ones' closest neighbors are defined as those within a four or five house radius of their own. Those in apartments or condominiums identified close neighbors as those they saw regularly while coming and going from their homes, and this often depended on the layout of the buildings.

Participants most often defined their connection to neighbors as those who can be counted on for help when sickness strikes or to water each other's plants and keep an eye on the house when they are away. Outside of these few people, others in the neighborhood are relative strangers. More than one resident compared Las Vegas with other communities and concluded that neighbors

"…talk to each other [in other towns]. Here you are strangers."

"I get no sense of community here."

Participants seem to have adapted to the relative scarcity of close neighborly bonds by developing a sense of comfort and trust toward neighbors whom they can regularly *see*, but do not know in any meaningful way. Several participants talked about their general trust of relative strangers whom they regularly see walking their dog, pulling into their driveway, or working in their yard. They feel some solace in just knowing others are around consistently and could probably be called upon for help in an emergency, should the need arise. Although, such neighborly connections are tenuous, they are something to hold onto in a 24-hour town where, as two participants put it,

"Everyone is busy and has their own agenda."

"I know some of the neighbors but nobody has time to visit."

These circumstances take a toll on some resident's identification with their neighborhood. As a participant explained, "I have good neighbors, but I don't have a huge sense of belonging to my neighborhood." For others, just knowing neighbors are around is enough for them.

"I'm right around Fremont. I wouldn't live anywhere else. It's a good neighborhood...real diverse. Everybody kind of keeps to themselves. But if something happens, we pay attention. So it's a good neighborhood."

Focus group participants also talked of feeling wary of getting too close to others. They perceive a transient population and culture that works against building strong community bonds. One woman explained,

"I am friendly with my neighbors and…we look out for each other…But, it's like nobody really does get to close because people move a lot. The ground just moves a lot."

Several participants believe that too many people have come to Las Vegas on only a temporary basis with no interest in establishing roots and giving back to the community. Their perception of transience is also bolstered by recent economic changes that have produced a rash of foreclosures and vacancies that are changing the character of neighborhoods.

Effects of declining economy

Focus group participants emphasized how foreclosures and vacancies harm neighborhood aesthetics, which in turn affects residents' feelings of connection to their neighbors and neighborhood. As vacancies rise, houses fall into disrepair, landscaping dies, and graffiti and vandalism increases. Participants describe a snowballing effect: as neighborhood aesthetics suffer, quality of life suffers, and residents' pride in their neighborhood and connection to their neighbors declines. Many participants said they did what they could to stem the tide of decline, by cleaning trash and tidying yards in vacant houses and apartments. But, they sense that their limited efforts will not be enough.

Long-time city residents (i.e., those living in Las Vegas for more than 20 years) are particularly sensitive to waning community spirit and deteriorating neighborhoods.

A 29-year City of Las Vegas resident said,

> *"This city is nothing like it was in those early years. It was small and quiet and people knew each other and there was a lot of bonding. I don't believe today it is quite so because of the growth and transient nature of neighborhoods and people in and out of homes and so on."*

Long-time residents fondly recalled a past quality of life that felt secure, safe, and neighborly. These feelings are no longer as strong, in part because they know fewer neighbors.

Participants cite the City's rapid and extensive population growth as a prime culprit. A common refrain across each focus group is that "Las Vegas has gotten too big too fast." Participants lament the influx of new residents who do not show a commitment to building community. As one long-term resident observed,

> *"I think the longer you are in the neighborhood the more you care about it. So the people that come and go out of the neighborhood, I don't think they even give it a second thought because the people that have been there are the ones are staying there for years after this and they care about what is happening to it."*

Points of Community Connection and Vibrancy

Despite concerns about neighborhood bonds, participants also express hope and optimism that they and the City can work together to meet the challenges of creating strong community connections needed to build vibrant, livable neighborhoods. Below are the areas focus group participants brought up most frequently as sources of connection and belonging.

Youth

All focus groups emphasized children as a key component of vibrant neighborhood life. Children act as a social lubricant for neighborliness. Neighbors connect with one another as their children play together, when individuals and families meet and converse on walks

through their neighborhoods, and in settings such as schools and parks where families converge. Participants feel that the real City they live in is far from the adult playground image that we've so successfully cultivated. For participants, the City is a place to live, support families, and create community. Children are a crucial part of the community experience and will grow to become the next generation of Las Vegans. Two participants captured a common sentiment among the focus groups when they said simply,

> *"We need to take care of our children."*
>
> *"They are our future and we need to have something they can hold onto."*

Participants feel that the presence of children in their neighborhood creates important opportunities for families to connect and neighborhood solidarity to grow. Yet, they worry that these opportunities are declining. Participants worry that their neighborhoods are no longer places where children play outside and connect with other families as much as we need. One participant explained,

> *"The closer you are as a neighborhood the more likely you are to see kids outside their house. I think the families in those neighborhoods that are closer are definitely more active and are willing to go outside and interact with others."*

Several participants attributed the declining presence of children in their neighborhoods to various social changes, such as television, video game culture and even parents' fears of strangers that keep their kids confined to the house and backyards. One participant said,

> *"There's nothing spontaneous about little kids anymore in lots of neighborhoods. In my neighborhood there are a lot of older people [and] young families and there are small kids, but you don't see them outside. You don't see kids playing in neighborhoods. I think there is a lot of fear from parents to let their kids play outside today."*

Neighborliness suffers when the opportunities for social connections decline.

Our focus group participants' concerns about family connections placed part of the responsibility upon parents' shoulders to get their families out in their neighborhoods and active in their community. But, their emphasis on children and neighborhood connections was also part of a wider discussion of youth and support services in the city. One resident said,

> *"I'm really concerned about the services that are available for the kids in the city."*

She worried that if children do not have opportunities to focus and direct their creative energies, then we miss the chance to raise the next generation of City leaders and responsible citizens.

Participants' concerns were especially directed at teenagers. Focus group participants were virtually unanimous in their support for youth services for all ages, but were especially vocal in their perception that there are fewer constructive outlets for children as they age. A participant said,

> *"There is nowhere for kids after a certain age. It's like you are just grown up now. They are forgotten. They just get forgotten as they head into middle school on into high school. There is nothing for them, you know, there is no places for them, even community centers."*

Another resident said that options for child-friendly activities drastically narrowed as her sons grew older.

> *"I noticed a dramatic drop as my sons got older, in the number of programs that are available. There are very few places where teens could go and kind of just, you know they couldn't go to the casinos and go bowling because after a certain time they can't be there. Where does it put these kids?"*

Participants also made suggestions about the goal of youth services. One commented that youth services are important as a

> *"…means to an end. If you get them off the streets then they are not in jail or they are getting an education. It is important for those kinds of services to be there for the kids."*

Another participant said,

> *"There needs to be more leadership programs when kids start getting a little bit older and that is where the responsibility could go without spending a lot of extra money, and that's developing our youth…let these kids that are pre-teens and teens and on into high school, you know, teach them leadership through going out into communities and making a difference."*

Parks and Community Centers

Participants clearly and consistently saw parks and community centers as focal public spaces for neighborhoods. Participants named public spaces as those few places where feelings of belonging are created. Participants expressed pride in having quality parks. Participants see them as points for neighborhood identification and public spaces where many neighbors gather and connect with one another. Focus group participants stress the need to support and maintain these spaces as symbols of neighborhood vibrancy.

All focus groups emphasized parks as invaluable community resources for children, families, neighborhoods, and community building. Participants perceive neighborhoods with parks as more tight-knit, healthy, and stable. As one resident said about parks and community centers,

> *"I think those type of services are really important and that the City continues to provide those things so that the people in the neighborhoods who are trying to bring their neighborhood up to a better level, can continue to feel pride in the neighborhood."*

> *"The thing I've noticed about Las Vegas is the number of parks. It's wonderful for children."*

Participants expressed strong support for park renovations, such as the recently completed renovation of Justice Myron E. Leavitt Family Park (formerly Jaycee Park) in Ward 3. Reflecting on the changes that the Leavitt Family Park renovation has brought residents said,

> *"I love the fact that they redid the park at the corner. When we first moved into the neighborhood, there weren't as many people at the park. But now there are people who come and it is always jam-packed. It is really good to see it."*

"The park is actually participated in and enjoyed. You can go over there at six o'clock in the morning and you can count over 50 people exercising, walking around, and there are children there, before they go to work…that was not happening before. And that to me is a big deal."

Such vibrant public spaces create positive ripple effects through surrounding neighborhoods. As a resident explained,

"[The Leavitt Family Park renovation] has brought the neighborhood more to a community level. You know, we have the park and we are taking pride in the neighborhood again. And people are working on their houses again. And that shows an interest in the community. It shows an interest in what you want to put into the community. Just by doing what you need to do to make a better place to live. And it's not just for you; it is for the entire community."

Community centers are also invaluable to neighborhood vibrancy. A resident cited the range of classes and activities as important for both children and seniors. She said,

"There's guitar lessons, there's festivals, everything at these parks and recreation centers. Also swimming, cooking, and dancing. If they could just build a few more of those… "

At the same time, despite these positive statements about public parks and their role in community development, some participants perceive serious inequities regarding the number of parks, their size, and distribution across the City. These participants perceive that newer areas, especially west of Las Vegas Boulevard and outside the urban core, have more parks and better parks. Participants in areas without parks saw it as an indication of the City not caring about their neighborhood. A downtown as Vegas resident said,

"We have no parks, no nothing, but yet you drive in other areas and there's fantastic parks."

Some participants also expressed frustration with the continued closure of Circle Park, near the John S. Park and Huntridge neighborhoods.

City-Neighborhood Partnerships

Focus group participants see Las Vegas as a young city full of possibilities and promise. Participants feel a responsibility to partner with the City to create livable, sustainable neighborhoods.

Community building requires citizens to act. As one focus group participant explained,

"It is up to the neighbors to get their own sense of community. I mean there is only so much responsibility that is the City's. [The City] makes the resources available, but it's like anything else. Nobody can force you, or force people to get together. People still have to do it, you know?

Community building also requires City support in the form of more outreach by officials and information and resources for community building. Participants want to see City Council members and officials out in neighborhoods more, organizing and attending neighborhood meetings and informational forums. Spanish speaking focus group participants felt particularly left out in their outreach and communication with the City. One focus group participant said,

"There should be maybe a neighborhood meeting with Council members once every three months, once every four months, once every six months."

Such events could strengthen people's connection to City government and reveal community support resources that are available. Another participant said,

"There are resources out there. But the City can maybe focus or direct people to what is already there…bring to light what is happening so that people know if they are looking for a connection."

Safe City

Focus group participants had a sense of the wide range of elements that go into maintaining a safe city. City residents in our focus groups responded strongly to questions about potential cuts in fire services, emergency medical services, and response to violent crimes, stating that these services are fundamental requirements. One participant captured a common sentiment across all focus groups when she said that fire and emergency medical "…are basic services that we can't live without in a city." Participants across all focus groups are satisfied with present service levels, calling fire and emergency services "efficient" and "effective."

Participants also discussed costs associated with emergency fire and medical services, noting that cost reductions seem appropriate if they can be accomplished without reducing service level. As a focus group participant put it,

"The services are good and the equipment is all good. The problem is the cost. This has to be brought under control [without] reducing response times. You don't want to cut services to the community, you want to cut costs to operate."

Other participants said that if the costs justify the good service, then they "would rather pay to get that service."

At the same time, most residents expressed satisfaction with the safety of their neighborhoods. Focus group participants feel relatively safe in their day-to-day activities. Some feared walking in their neighborhoods after dark and felt anxious about people on their streets whom they do not recognize. Long-term residents fondly reflected on a time when they were familiar with most of their neighbors, kids played in the streets, and doors were left unlocked with no worries. One long-term resident said,

"I just remember we used to leave our doors unlocked and now I feel like I'm a prisoner. I have bars around my house and my neighborhood isn't that bad."

Participants in the downtown core (Wards 3 and 5) see their neighborhood as on the cusp of two futures. Either redevelopment efforts will take hold or redevelopment will stagnate and the area will decline. Participants are especially sensitive to a rise in vacant properties. Two participants explained that downtown area vacancies

"makes it scary. Why are they all empty? Why aren't they doing something with those?"

"I could see downtown area even getting worse. "

Participants also feel that a safe city values education and cultural opportunities that bring people together in ways that enhance community spirit among Las Vegans. To that end, they support educational and cultural opportunities represented by the Smith Center and 18b Arts District. In several focus groups in lower income neighborhoods, participants

expressed concerns about youth delinquency adversely affecting their neighborhoods. Yet they saw youth programs that engage young residents in constructive activities as an important part of the solution to these problems.

Finally, a safe city prioritizes long-term water and energy security. This means residents must conserve water and be penalized for water waste. Energy security requires support for renewable solar, wind, and geothermal power sources for Las Vegas.

All focus groups appear to realize that the City's growth has created a new reality that requires long-term planning and commitment to effective emergency services, education and cultural opportunities, and sustainable resources. They are willing to adapt to this new reality and expects the City to as well.

Fiscally Sound Government

There is a general understanding among focus group participants that there are shortfalls in the City of Las Vegas budget and that reductions in services are pending. There is empathy that hard decisions will have to be made that there is only so much to go around. Beyond these general feelings, focus group participants did not discuss specific fiscal strategies with any specificity. There was no discussion of any perceived government waste or overspending. Participants stated that they needed more from government, not less.

Pro Business Environment--Diversification

Focus group participants see diversified business and job growth as a city priority. They also said that planning and direction are crucial. Participants did not simply want job growth of any type, but growth that fits a long-range development plan of what we want the City to be ten, twenty, and fifty years down the road. Participants said the City must look to smart growth that emphasizes economic diversification to expand the tax base beyond the boom-bust casino industry. As a participant said,

> *"You cannot have an economy or city built on one particular industry. I think they need to diversify and get something else into this area to support people, get the right jobs and tax base."*

While supportive, participants are also simultaneously skeptical about the prospects of economic diversification in the City, especially with the ongoing national economic recession. They perceive the City as singularly reliant on gaming for revenue and doubt that much will change. A long-time resident explained her attitude,

> *"It has been said every year. 'There needs to be diversity. We cannot rely on gaming.' Yet, the 40 some odd years I've been here, the ups and downs of gaming have happened and it always recovered because people had the money to come here. Well, they don't anymore. That's what is really harming our economy. We need something beyond gaming to help us weather these storms."*

Participants also cited educational issues as an obstacle to economic diversification. A participant said,

> *"Even with the tax benefits, corporations can't always get the kind of people they need for their businesses because the labor pool here isn't educated. There is no labor pool here with that kind of education. They need labor that*

has an education. If it's not here, they cannot bring everybody they want. They want to be able to hire here and it's not here."

Smart growth also requires clear communication from policy-makers about planning and consultation with citizens about the desired development trajectory.

During discussions about economic development, participants commented positively on activities in Union Park as a start toward diversification. Participants felt that the City should capitalize on the arrival of the Cleveland Clinic and the Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Heath to promote medical and technology sectors, along with specialty trades such as the furniture exposition business at the World Market Center.

Participants made these comments while simultaneously expressing concern that a lack of comprehensive long-term planning is at the heart of most city problems. Participants feel that the last decade has been one of snowballing growth with too little attention paid the negative consequences of that growth. Participants cite poor urban planning, sprawling, leapfrog growth that compromises environmental and quality of life concerns.

[The City] is too spread out, it's suburbanized, poor urban planning in this community."

"It's gotten too big"

"They didn't plan the growth properly. The developers came in and ruined this place just like they ruined San Diego by overdeveloping and greed."

"They are taking over the desert and the desert is a very fragile ecology, and so we have all of these houses being built out there because we have people coming in. But they just keep bringing in more people and building more houses."

Yet, several participants also compared Las Vegas positively to Los Angeles. For them, Las Vegas is still in a position to steer growth in constructive ways that are environmentally sound and meet economic and quality of life needs of its residents.

Vibrant Urban Fabric

As we have discussed, most focus group participants express pride and admiration for how far the City of Las Vegas has come, and many express pride in downtown development efforts as a part of this. They described a livable urban environment as one that sustains a wide-range of businesses, offers diverse educational and cultural opportunities, and is home to generations of families. Focus group participants cite the Union Park development, the 18b Arts District, and the Springs Preserve as prime example of business and cultural activities that reflect this vision of a livable city.

Participants emphasized several themes important for creating a vibrant urban core. The first is the need for educational and cultural opportunities for teenagers, along with parks and other public spaces, as components of a livable urban community. Participants also suggested that the City take advantage of the beautiful natural surroundings adjacent to the City to enhance perceptions of what urban living in Las Vegas has to offer.

At the same time, some participants perceived inequities about where the investment in our urban development has so far been concentrated. Specifically, they expressed that downtown development is mainly being concentrated west of Las Vegas Boulevard, while areas east of Las Vegas Boulevard struggle unnoticed and underserved.

In addition, participants in all focus groups talked about homelessness as a problem in urban communities. There were two themes in these discussions. First, participants said that homelessness could happen to almost anyone and the problem will likely to get worse as the economy continues to stagnate. Second, participants said that there should be more services for those who want them.

> *I don't want to condemn the homeless, it seems like there's nothing there for them and anyone who gets down low.*
>
> *They are cutting these services and it's going to get worse. You got a lot of people dropping off the unemployment roll.*
>
> *It can happen to anyone. It could happen to me. You get sick, you can't pay your bills, it happens. And you're getting a lot of veterans also and all the services are being cut right now, it's disgraceful.*

Focus group participants recognized that the City must make difficult budget decisions. However, in recent years participants felt that the City of Las Vegas has begun to create the groundwork for a vibrant, livable, urban setting. They worry that in the present economic crisis, the City will be forced to pull back from this vision as resources are drawn away from community building activities; the effects could be devastating and take years to recover from.

Participants were also clear that they were willing to act to support and participate in whatever continued investments can be made in developing and sustaining a vibrant, livable, urban environment. They want their neighborhoods to be aesthetically appealing spaces where they feel commonality, trust, solidarity, mutual reliance, and pride. Creating vibrant neighborhoods requires commitment from residents and City support. As a participant said, we need to

> *"…maintain a certain level of acceptance or bringing things forward to make it livable for everybody. [Strong communities] require city services because if somebody doesn't come and pick up the trash, and it is on the street, then nobody wants to live in the neighborhood. So we can't sustain that relationship with our neighbors because we don't want to be there anymore. A sustainable community comes together to help each other sustain a certain standard of living. And the City is part of that community. The county is part of that community. The neighbors in general are part of that community."*

City Services Survey Findings

This section of the report provides detailed discussion of participants' thoughts about specific City of Las Vegas services. As described in the Methodology section above, focus group participants took a brief survey responding to two items taken from the City of Las Vegas 2009 Community Assessment administered by the UNLV Cannon Survey Center. The following items indicate how focus group participants interpreted and discussed the two questions about specific City of Las Vegas services drawn from that survey.

City Services: Most Satisfied

Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services

Participants across all of the focus groups consistently responded that they were most satisfied with fire department services and emergency medical services. They describe these services as "essential" and "necessary" to life and health of the City. Participants are impressed with the speed and efficiency of fire and emergency medical services, describing them as "reliable," "prompt," "responsive," "courteous," "helpful," "respectful," and "impressive."

Animal Control

Participants also discussed animal control as an important and well-perceived Las Vegas City service. Similar to Fire and Medical response, participants see animal control as a necessary service in the context of urban living. They perceive animal issues—strays and feral animal populations, as well as non-stray animal nuisance problems (i.e., barking dogs, aggressive animals)—as important concerns that must be addressed. Discussions centered on how "reliable" and "fairly effective" animal control officers are in handling problems when those problems are reported.

There was a bit of confusion by some respondents about how to interpret the meaning of animal control as a city service. Some participants appeared to interpret "animal control" to mean whether or not they are satisfied with their own neighbor's control (or lack) of their barking dog, aggressive dog, etc. However, most participants appeared to correctly interpret the question to refer to the City of Las Vegas Animal Control.

City Services: Least Satisfied

Downtown Parking

Participants cited downtown parking as one of their least satisfied areas of City service. Respondents consistently described frustration with the lack of available parking, poor proximity to highly-frequented downtown areas (i.e. government buildings such as the jail, courthouse, and City Hall), and the exorbitant cost of both parking meters and fines for running over what participants consider inordinately short meter times. Discussions revolved around participants' need to develop "creative" parking strategies when parking downtown. Such strategies include parking in casino self-park garages and other spots not intended for them.

Cleaning vacant lots

Participants cited cleaning vacant lots as one of the services they are least satisfied with. There appears to be a variety of interpretations among the respondents that explain their dissatisfaction. Some respondents discussed the large number of vacant lots they see and their desire to have them cleaned of the trash, signs, and other items. These respondents thought that the City simply couldn't keep up with the large number of vacant lots.

Other respondents agreed on the importance of cleaning vacant lots, but were unsure if this is a City service and whether or not it should be a City service obligation or the property owners' responsibility.

Another interpretation issue pivoted on whether "vacant lots" refer to commercial or government owned properties, or private residences. Participants expressed the need for attention to all of these.

Finally, most respondents seemed to agree that cleaning vacant lots is an important service, but not a necessary one when compared to emergency medical or fire services.

Condition of city streets

Participants referred often to their frustration with the condition of city streets. They repeatedly cited poor lane markings, poorly lit intersections, ongoing construction hassles (i.e., too much construction at one time compromises efficient travel through the city), and handicap access issues on sidewalks and crosswalks in some neighborhoods.

Homeless encampment removal

Homeless encampment removal was a popular topic of conversation across all focus groups. First, participants identified the large population of homeless in Las Vegas as a "bad situation" that needs a solution. However, participants "don't want to condemn the homeless" just for being homeless. As one respondent said, "They [homeless] have a right to be in the city just as much as any of us do." Another reflected that, "it [homelessness] can happen to anyone who gets down low, because everything is so stretched out…." There is general support for City services that aid those homeless who desire help. However there is confusion about what solutions are available.

There is a lack of clarity about what "homeless encampment removal" means as a City service. Participants questioned whether it simply means removal of the encampments with no support services provided afterwards, or if it means removing the encampments while providing mental health services, food, and shelter options. Participants talked about homeless encampment removal as an important service if it was combined with homeless support services.

In addition, not all participants believed homeless encampments themselves were a problem. Some had not come across them around their neighborhoods. Most discussion over the survey item on encampments centered on the general problem of homelessness.

City Services: Bad to Reduce

Emergency fire/medical response services & response rate to violent crime

Across all focus groups, emergency fire and medical response and response to violent crime were discussed as essential services that are necessary to maintain. Respondents talked about each as "basic services we can't live without." Some predicted "mayhem" if there are

substantial reductions. As one participant said, "Medical alert and fire department… that stuff is important. Lives are involved in that. The other stuff [city services] is nice things to have but…compared to someone who is dying…".

Response time to emergency medical services

Similarly, response time to emergency medical services was met with across the board support among respondents. Reactions included: "a lot can happen in a minute;" "if it is good now I think we should keep it like it is;" "make it better if you can;" "human lives are most important."

Youth programs

Youth programs were a popular topic in the focus groups, with most conversations revolving around the need to offer youth educational, sports, health programs, and civic leadership opportunities. Some respondents saw these as able to instill positive qualities in early childhood and beyond and would keep young residents away from distracting and corrupting influences. Participants said, "You must keep kids off streets, give them educational opportunities, as an investment in the future;" and, it is "productive" to support youth services that support and teach "accountability and social responsibility."

Some respondents cited a special need for programs for teens stuck between adolescence and adulthood with few constructive options. Participants suggested the City could implement "service days" and "leadership programs" to promote volunteerism and educational opportunities outside of the school classroom.

Yet, there is also great lack of clarity about precisely what youth services the City provides. Several focus group participants in each session asked questions such as,

> *"So what are the City services for youth?"*
>
> *"Actually I would like to know, what is the City's duties. I do not know what the City is obligated to do."*
>
> *"I'd like to know what the role of the City is? What is their responsibility?"*

As would be expected, some of these questions came from childless participants, although not all. It appeared that many participants simply did not know what programs and opportunities the City provides for youth. The common attitude among them, however, seems to be that youth services are important and to cut them would be, in the words of one participant, a "bad idea."

Maintenance of city parks

Maintenance of city parks came up in several focus group discussions as crucial for public health and community building. Respondents feel that having neighborhood gathering places such as city parks is important to solidarity and community spirit. The key for many participants, especially those in the older sections on the City's east side, was to renovate and maintain the older parks to reflect the newness, cleanliness, and appeal of the newer parks on the City's west side.

Discussion of parks and park maintenance also coincided with discussions of youth and youth services. Parks are important places for youth to gather and play, enhancing their health and keeping them out of trouble. For this to happen, parks must be appealing to youth and other participants in the first place.

Animal Control

Respondents perceive animal control as a crucial necessity due to the amount of stray and dangerous animals. Their concerns coincided with the comments above on most satisfied City services.

City Services: Good to Reduce

Fire Prevention

Fire prevention is a City services commonly cited as good to reduce. Respondents indicated that the fire prevention service category as a non-essential item, especially when compared to emergency fire response.

There is also a great deal of confusion about what the fire prevention service category refers to. Several participants asked, "What is fire prevention?" Others tried to interpret for the group that fire prevention must mean getting instructions on how to install smoke alarms or sprinkler systems. Others agreed with one respondent who said simply, "I haven't seen these [fire prevention] efforts directly."

Cleaning vacant lots

The ranking of cleaning vacant lots as a service to reduce reflects a perception that, while it is a nice service to have and important for community perception, it is non-essential when compared to services such as fire and emergency medical response. As one respondent explained, "It's not a necessity compared to someone who is dying." In addition, some perceived that this was a responsibility of property owners.

There was a bit of worry about cutting this service, however. Participants in two focus groups discussed the importance of a clean, well-maintained neighborhood to community pride and involvement. Participants worried about vacant houses and lots as aesthetic eyesores and magnets for squatters or graffiti artists. Participants said it is important that vacant spaces are not left unattended, as community pride and attachment will falter. Some participants speculated that perhaps the City could organize volunteers in neighborhoods for vacant lot cleanup.

Law enforcement in city parks and facilities

Several respondents discussed law enforcement in city parks and facilities as a service item that could be reduced if needed. Participants speculated that park users themselves can informally "police" the parks during the day, when there is little fear of crime anyway. Other participants were unaware that parks had a specific law enforcement group.

Participants defined park policing and cleaning vacant lots as "non-essential," services, when compared to "essential" services such as fire and emergency medical services. However, respondents made clear that by "non-essential," they did not mean "unimportant."

Considerations

Consideration 1: Focus group participants expect City government to sustain existing service levels, especially for essential health and safety services such as emergency fire and medical services. Participants also offered more consensus on what programs to maintain than what to cut. Participants are not especially well versed in the details of how City services are funded and how modifications might affect service levels; nor are they especially inclined to know the details.

> *As the City implements budget reductions, City officials should communicate very clearly and specifically about what budget reductions will mean to existing service levels and how reductions will or will not directly affect City residents. This is especially important regarding response times and effectiveness for emergency fire and medical services.*

Consideration 2: Youth support services are important to focus group participants. When considering their future, participants place a great deal of importance on investing in children to grow and develop into to tomorrow's City leaders and residents. It is especially important to provide teenagers with safe, challenging educational and cultural programs and activities.

> *As officials make budget decisions, they should consider the importance participants place on youth services and try to mitigate reductions that compromise City-sponsored education and cultural activities for youth.*

Consideration 3: Participants take responsibility for creating strong neighborhoods, but need the City to support their efforts by providing leadership, direction, and resources.

> *Officials should consider the effect of reducing services that influence residents' feeling of pride and investment in their community. Officials may consider ways to create partnerships with residents to supplement any reductions in services that protect neighborhood aesthetics, support community gatherings, and sustain public spaces, such as parks and community centers. This might include organizing volunteer cleanup groups for parks and vacant lots.*

Consideration 4: Many participants are confused about the City of Las Vegas' specific service obligations to the community. This confusion was especially prominent in discussions of youth services and neighborhood support. Confusion was also apparent regarding City responsibilities in comparison with county, regional, and state entities. Additionally, respondents were uncertain about the City's role in public transportation, policing, and youth education.

> *As the City proceeds with budget reductions, there should be clear communication to participants about the scope of City obligations, what different City services specifically provide for residents, and the relationship of City services to services provided by other municipal, regional, and state agencies*

Consideration 5: Focus group participants identify economic diversity as a high priority for the City.

> *City officials should continue to take serious steps to spur economic diversification that will expand the tax-base and build a more economically*

stable, livable city. There should be clear and constant communication about all economic diversification efforts.

Consideration 6: All focus group participants were very appreciative that the City reached out for their ideas, thoughts, and opinions. Participants were pleasantly surprised, enthusiastic, and proud to serve their City and community needs through their involvement in the focus groups. They would like more of these neighborhood-based opportunities to participate in City problem-solving efforts.

City officials should consider innovative ways to better communicate and reach out to City residents and create opportunities for civic involvement.

About the LVMASS research team

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Area Social Survey (LVMASS) project is a long-term research project in the Department of Sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas designed to identify the socio-spatial distribution of knowledge, opinions, and perceptions about urban sustainability in the Las Vegas Metropolitan Area. The project focuses on how Las Vegas residents think about their urban environment across three dimensions of sustainability: 1) community and quality of life; 2) condition of the natural environment; 3) urban economic development.

LVMASS has three goals.

1) **To provide basic research on urban sustainability** in rapidly growing regions. It will also provide data to UNLV researchers and their partners for assessing research questions about community formation, spatial variation in public attitudes, social integration, health, education, and quality of life, ecological attitudes, economic concerns, environmental opinions, and public desires for urban living.
2) **To provide data that will assist local and regional governments and planners** in crafting informed, strategic policy programs for social, economic, and ecological sustainability.
3) **To train future researchers** through the UNLV Department of Sociology graduate program in urban sociology.

LVMASS team members include:

Robert Futrell, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Sociology at UNLV. Dr. Futrell's research focuses on the interplay of social, economic, and political factors influencing sustainable development in the southwestern United States. He also writes on the dynamics of citizen activism and involvement in the democratic process and extremist social movements.

Christie Batson, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at UNLV. Dr. Batson's primary research has focused on social demography and racial and ethnic populations. Her quantitative research background includes survey design and analysis. Dr. Batson's research interest in immigration to new destinations explores the economic opportunities of Las Vegas on the rapid growth of immigrant communities and their integration within the larger urban landscape.

Barb Brents, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Sociology at UNLV. Dr. Brents' primary research explores social policy and the formation of political power among social groups. She is currently looking at these topics in the context of informal labor and global tourist economies, but she has also published research on welfare policies, sexual commerce, housing policy, racial representations in tourist corridors and other urban problems.

Department of Sociology graduate students on the project include Mark Salvaggio, M.A.; Andrea Dassopoulos, M.A.; Chrissy Nicholas, M.A.; and Candace Griffith, M.A. Elena Pellinen Howe is our Spanish language consultant.

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Appendices

Table 1: Focus Group Sample Characteristics

Table 1. Focus Group Sample Characteristics, City of Las Vegas Residents.

Descriptives	%
Sex	
Male	35.5
Female	64.5
Race	
White	66.7
Black	0.0
Asian	3.3
American Indian	3.3
Other	26.7
Hispanic	
Yes	36.7
No	63.3
Employment Status	
Full-time	26.7
Part-time	0.0
Retired	20.0
Homemaker	10.0
Unemployed	36.7
Student	3.3
Other	3.3
Education	
Some high school or less	25.8
High school Diploma	6.4
Some college	32.2
College Degree or more	35.5
Own or rent	
Own	51.6
Rent	48.4
Mean Age	51.3
Mean Number of Years lived in Las Vegas	16.7
Mean Number of Years lived in Current Neighborhood	10.6

Table 2: Focus Group survey results: Good and Bad Services to Reduce

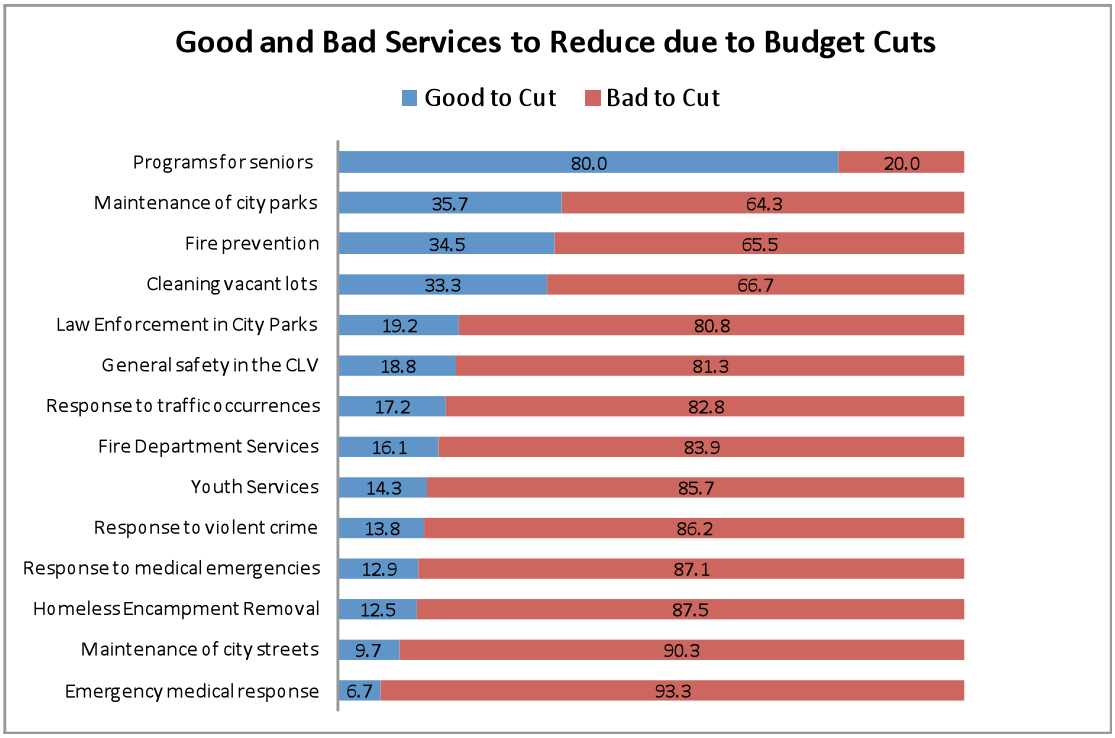
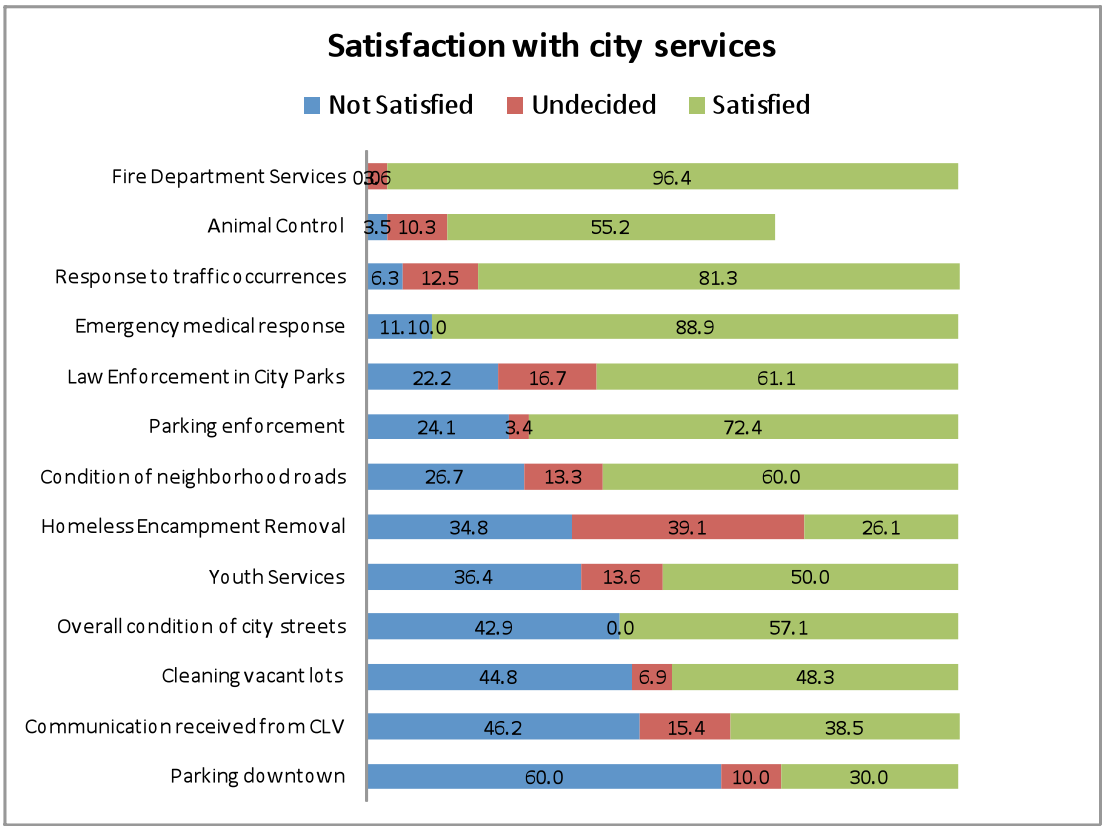


Table 3: Focus Group Survey Results: Satisfaction with City Services



Appendix 4: Focus Group Survey

City of Las Vegas Services

Department of Sociology

University of Nevada Las Vegas

1. For each of the following city services, please indicate if you are not satisfied, somewhat unsatisfied, somewhat satisfied, or very satisfied with the service. If you are not familiar with the service select N/A.

Name of City Service	**1** Not Satisfied	**2** Somewhat Unsatisfied	**3** Undecided	**4** Somewhat Satisfied	**5** Very Satisfied	**N/A** Not familiar with service
The availability of services and programs offered for children and youth	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Law enforcement services in city parks and facilities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Animal Control	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fire Department Services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Emergency Medical Services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cleaning Vacant Lots	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Homeless encampment removal	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parking Enforcement	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The condition of my neighborhood road lane markings	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The availability of parking in the downtown area	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Communication received from the City of Las Vegas	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Response time to traffic occurrences	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Overall condition of city streets	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Due to cuts in the budget, some services may have to be reduced. For each of the following services please indicate whether this would be very good, good, bad, or very bad to reduce.

Name of City Service	**1** Very Good	**2** Good	**3** Bad	**4** Very Bad	**5** Not Sure
Emergency medical response services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Homeless Encampment Removal	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fire response services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Response time to traffic occurrences	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Response time to medical emergencies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Maintenance of city streets	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Maintenance of city parks	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Programs for youth	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fire prevention	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Response rates to violent crimes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Law enforcement services in city parks and facilities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cleaning Vacant Lots	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Programs for Seniors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
General Safety services in the City of Las Vegas	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

1. What year were you born?_____

2. How many years have you lived in the Las Vegas Valley?_____

3. How many years have you lived in your current neighborhood?_____

4. What is your current employment status?
    a. Working full-time
    b. Working part-time
    c. Retired
    d. A homemaker
    e. Unemployed
    f. Student
    g. Other

5. What is your current marital status?
    a. Married
    b. Single
    c. Divorced
    d. Widowed
    e. Separated
    f. Living with a partner but not married

6. What is your gender?
    a. Male
    b. Female

7. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
    a. Less than high school
    b. Some high school
    c. High school diploma
    d. Some college
    e. College Degree
    f. Graduate or Professional Degree

8. What is your racial background?
    a. White
    b. African American
    c. Asian or Asian American
    d. American Indian or Native American
    e. Pacific Islander
    f. Other

9. Do you consider yourself to be Hispanic, Latino, Mexican-American, or Spanish background?
    a. Yes
    b. No

10. Do you currently own or rent your home?
    a. Own
    b. Rent

11. What is your zip code?_____